



**MONTCLAIR STATE**  
UNIVERSITY

Montclair State University  
**Montclair State University Digital  
Commons**

---

Department of English Faculty Scholarship and  
Creative Works

Department of English

---

Winter 2001

## Sacred Forgeries and the Translation of Nothing in the Tablets of Armand Schwerner

Willard Gingerich  
gingerichw@montclair.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/english-facpubs>



Part of the [Modern Literature Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

---

### MSU Digital Commons Citation

Gingerich, Willard, "Sacred Forgeries and the Translation of Nothing in the Tablets of Armand Schwerner" (2001). *Department of English Faculty Scholarship and Creative Works*. 85.  
<https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/english-facpubs/85>

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at Montclair State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Department of English Faculty Scholarship and Creative Works by an authorized administrator of Montclair State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@montclair.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@montclair.edu).

# TALISMAN

a journal of contemporary  
poetry and poetics

---

---

#21/#22—winter/spring 2001—\$10

---

---

~  
MAUREEN  
OWEN  
ISSUE  
~



DRAWING FOR A POSTER BY PAUL BEATHON

Susan Smith Nash  
"Translating Bilingual  
Texts"

~  
Zhang Ziqing  
on Chinese Poetry

~  
Daniel Morris  
on John Yau

Burt Kimmelman,  
Willard Gingrich,  
Michael Heller,  
Thomas Lavazzi,  
and Stephen Paul  
Miller on  
Armand Schwerner  
and Translation

Sacred Forgeries and Translation of Nothing  
in the *Tablets* of Armand Schwerner

Armand Schwerner recalled me again to the paradox of our essential condition: that the inescapable and necessary ground of our being is the voice of the Divine; but the Divine steadfastly refuses to speak. Therefore, we find ourselves, age after age, forced to translate an immense silence, a translation whose purpose is to obscure the forgery of its source: the inarticulate Divine.

The master trope of Armand Schwerner's *Tablets*, from their beginning through Tablet XXVII, through all their transforms and refinements, is translation: "... the presentation of all materials as 'translations'." (Glosses 4)

The contest of sober translation creates a mode suitable for seductions by the disordered large which is the contemporary, and the narrative, which is out of honor in the most relevant modern poetry.

To call this approach, this procedure, translation does little justice to its complexity. We might clarify its nature by adding the adjective *graphodiacritical*, or by substituting for 'translation' the noun *function-transfer*. This process is undeniably impoverishing, but those who come after us may consider these efforts as usable initial steps in trekking over the uncharted terrain.

The scholar/translator voice is Schwerner's figure of the poet *par excellence*, and the s/t's action of translation creates the language-space in which the *Tablets* may occur. I will suggest that while this trope of translation encompasses all the evident activity and labor of the poet/scholar, the trope of forgery grounds all his usages of that labor to shape a mode of mindfulness we might with some justification call "sacred" within the experience of our five-windowed human sensorium.

But before laying out some of Schwerner's more provocatively self-reflective commentaries—and he is also unique in this intensely self-focusing power to meld poetic voice and commentary beyond the *Tablets* themselves, becoming his own scholar/interpreter of the scholar/interpreter—I want to invoke a few American texts which I suggest open gates through which to usefully approach the *Tablets*.

First, from Stevens, the classic tone of the modernist fortunate fall, intellectual liberation, and claim for poetic primacy: "The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly." (*Adagia*, Opus Posthumous) Then, from the white voice of "The Snow Man":

For the listener, who listens in the snow,  
And, nothing himself, beholds  
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

From Emerson, the continuing echo of the Romantic American challenge, the opening lines of the 1836 essay, "Nature": "Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?" And finally, again from Stevens: "The act of the mind in finding what will suffice."

I lay these quotes out with some deliberation in order to set the context for my assumption that Schwerner's *Tablet*-work, at least as much if not more than the Bloomian canon of so-called "strong poets," belongs in the center of the onward flow of American poetry from Emersonian roots via Stevens' modernist transformations. I don't intend to argue this, simply to lay it bare as the background to a few personal ruminations and comments against the text of the *Tablets*. Finally, to steal a title phrase from Robert Duncan, the territory of "fictive certainties" in which Schwerner works is a territory common to the poets of our milieu and is, I would suggest, a territory which he will be seen increasingly to define.

Poetry, as a game, as act of faith, as celebration, as commemoration, as epic praise, as lyric plaint, as delight in pattern and repetition—poetry is in trouble. Not any more trouble than the Earth, concepts of nobility and selflessness, sense of utility, hope. But that's not saying too much. Whoever most largely perceives decreation may find himself praising entropy in self-defense. Or, if he is a poet, constitutionally unable to go all the way to formlessness and the joy of envisioning the running down of systems, he looks around for a way to make lasting monuments out of vaseline and lacunae. (*Sound*, 119)

When the Toltec king, Our Lord One Reed Quetzalcoatl, was seduced into drunkenness and betrayed by the owl-sorcerers Tezcatlipoca, Ihuimecatl and Toltecatl (they showed him his physical ugliness by presenting him with his first mirror), he is finally convinced to come out of hiding and depression by being "made up" in all the featherwork and masking of his iconographic attire. "And so they arrayed him in his attire and he was Quetzalcoatl," the divine one, the text says. "Then they handed him the mirror and when he looked on himself he was pleased with what he saw." This is the essence of all the *ixiptla* or masking rituals common to the Nahua and Mayan city-states of Mesoamerica and still practiced by the Pueblo towns. Children of the Hopi villages are brought into the kivas for the first time around age 9-10 where they discover that the masked kachinas whom they have known and feared and loved since infancy are their fathers, uncles, brothers, grandfathers. To be "made up" is to become a divine

being. To forge a mask, and believe in the forgery, knowing it exquisitely a mask, is the only means of recovery.

If it is the commonplace of our situation that we know men and women, individually and in concert, have historically "made up" our sacred narratives of gods and all their doings, oftentimes in our own images and sometimes against our images, then we know that all the divine voices, and all the narratives, songs and prayers in which they appear are works of human construction. Nothing about our sacred narratives is any less mysterious, or, I would argue, less sacred or divine for this, but the mystery is transposed to a different realm to become the quality of a being-within to whom Stevens gave the epithet "Imagination," inhabiting a self that invited a new instrumentality of contemplation and discovery. None of this is surprising to anyone who allies her- or himself to a modernist (or later) sensibility. What may not have been so obvious, however, except to those articulate and conflicted scholar-translators who sought and may still seek to compensate for the emptying of belief in a spiritual narrative by a feverish and obsessive immersion in the technologies of paleography and translation, is that this knowledge of the "made up-ness" of scriptural voices renders all such texts forgeries of a profound and subtle sort. Speaking of his discovery of certain previously unknown specialized cuneiform articulations in the introduction to his translation of Tablet XXVII, the scholar/translator describes his subject: "We might with a greater chance of accuracy understand such linguistic inventions as sacred forgery, or rather forgery prompted by a dazzled and mournful reconsideration, retrospective as well as perhaps economically profitable, of the sacred" (98).

It is this sense of "sacred forgeries" that I suggest the *Tablets* work to comprehend and exfoliate in the fictional elaboration of an imagination in the process of finding what will suffice for it now, in this emptied time and post-modern place. And this imagination, I suggest, always works for Schwerner, like a translation. Finding the language, the voices, in the archeology and paleography of self-making and psyche-cleansing to "add its own small measure to reality," in his own suggestion of purpose: "Not poetry as obeisance to the sacred, but as a creation of it in all its activity; not as an appeal for its survival in spite of a corrosive sense that the sacred is lost, but as a movement which itself might add its own small measure to reality" (*Sounds* 115). And since by his own insistence "there is no nuclear self"—as there can be no final non-continuent history and no ultimate archeology (how many new digs, "lost" Mayan, Sung Dynasty or Akkadian cities are still waiting for discovery?)—then the process is never complete, has no *telos*. Through the mechanisms of this extensive and increasingly detailed forgery, Schwerner has clearly become, and I echo Sherman Paul, "one of our master poets of the interior life."

It is in the self-aware character of such post-modern forgery, however, to cancel the Emersonian/Joycean modernist fabrication of poet as secular equivalent of the Congregationalist minister or Jesuit priest, forging correspondences in nature or epiphanies in Dublin; nor will it accept the Yeatsian substitution of Theosophy, or any other alternate fiction, for theology. Not even the unmediated "supreme fiction" of Stevens, however elegantly it sets the

stage, will finally provide the plurilogue necessary to carry off Schwerner's forgeries and imply their aura of the sacred through simultaneous self-exposure and denial of both forgery and sacredness.

This is to say Schwerner has generated a fundamental, distinct and increasingly inescapable set of images and figures (both poetic and personal) which "tries to penetrate to basic images, basic emotions, and so to compose a fundamental poetry even older than the ancient world," (Stevens, *Necessary Angel*) or to paraphrase Bertholf's remark about Charles Olson's insistent struggle: to be "reborn in the transforming presence of first things"—though we must qualify that to say "in the imagined presence of imagined first things." As the scholar/translator boldly asserts in his presentation of Tablet XXVI, "To the almost miraculous and widely recognized period which gave birth among others to the Mosaic teachings—1500 BCE, Socrates and the Buddha—500 BCE, and the Essene Christ, and their outflows, we must now add (ca.3200 BCE) the excursions in subjectivity hereunder subjoined. . ." (71).

Of course, all forgeries must present themselves originally as "found" objects, and it is Schwerner's elaborate trope of finding that generates in us the elegant and willful suspension of disbelief: "The uses of the past, by means of these found archaic objects, are thus more than ironic and other than nostalgic" (*Tablets* 134).

In Tablet XXV, first published in 1985, and in the two later *Tablets*, together with their accompanying notes, commentary, glosses and glyphic icons, Schwerner has complicated his forgeries in increasingly resonant ways, reaching back, or down, or through his archeological and epigraphical tropes to fundamental sites of selfhood, to the nexus of language-making and consciousness of being as formed by the contentions of eye and ear in the mind's play of the human sensorium. I quote from the laboratory notes of the scholar/translator in Tablet XXVI:

Though little credit has been given or recognition tendered to the possible development of a radical self-plumbing before the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE, recent paleographic research yields a sense of person as Self-examiner far earlier than any posited up to now. . . . But beyond the pictographs, and specially as complexly articulated with them, the Mind/Texture/Determinatives recently discovered truly reveal the nascent stages of the history of consciousness (70-71).

These contributions, early notations embodying archaic beginnings of human consciousness, appear to be roughly contemporaneous with the earliest systematic human pictographs. . . (77).

But through these invented texts and their attendant bogus linguistic and epigraphic classifications such as Utterance/Texture/Indicators, icons of the third-level Torque of Separativeness, Entrance-Exodus Vibration (E-E.V.) and of course the Mac graphics figures of the icons themselves, as well as the false transparency of the scholar/translator's voice—what does a sacred forgery

"forge"? Both a forgery which is sacred and a forgery of the sacred, no longer because through it we find power to perform a willing suspension of disbelief in the speaking of a silent god, but because it brings some primal and secret and impenetrable and ubiquitous and unchanging thing into view and expression—the poetic equivalent of the cyclotron. Schwerner's constructed artifacts and voices provide such revelations in the open field of selfhood and ego deconstruction.

The cumulative effect of the on going plurilogue of the *Tablets*, it has been observed by Christensen, is the destruction of ego in the literary act. The *Tablets*, he suggests, "is 'invisible', one of the more remarkable demonstrated instances of trading in ego for ethnos in the making of literature. Its depersonalization of language and imagination produces a sense of community and of a crowded human past. . . ." (158). Riding an Emersonian wave of thirst for original relation, Schwerner has discovered a choral voice far distant from, almost in fact, the antithesis, of the Emersonian subject ego. "I wanted to *make* the past," Schwerner has said, "so that there would be no fulminating ego busy ransacking the attic or the cellar or the storehouse or the armada. Everything would be in a certain sense co-equal in its non-being, because it would all be invented even though some of the sources clearly had to do with what we call history." (*APR* 31). And being co-equal with his non-being, the possibly blind Ur-Aryan of Tablet XXVI who may have been afflicted with a "developmentally atavistic membrane" over the eyes, comes to being through the voice of the scholar/ translator as the invented inventor of the 15 different types of Mind/ Texture/Determinatives in cuneiform epigraphy. These parodic linguistic features of a co-equal unreal scholarship are always ego-abolishing in direct proportion to the degree their "real" academic equivalents are ego-promoting and promotion-generating. It is a narrator's stance made more pronounced, and more secure, by the occasional reminders within the text that the voices emerging from translation do not usually share this concern for ego-elimination: Tablet XXVI, the scholar/translator points out, "as well as most of the materials following it, seems to embody the beginnings of early though incomplete and dualistically strained adventures into the nature of the Self, the figure of that Self, flawed because in its subjectivity the ego as a dualistically reflective subject does not have access to itself as subject; its access to itself is always unavoidably as an object; the ego is separated and cut off from itself" (80).

By making every voice and every utterance co-equal to its own non-being, to its own forgery, and enfolding the voices one within the other, Schwerner can inhabit each of them equally or in succession, yet only ever as a co-equally unreal ego, and so himself escape the obsessive dualities of object/subject ego-industry. There is no self but the mask.

And it is just exactly because of this ego-absolving, self-canceling quality of the utterances of the *Tablets* that Schwerner's post-modern forgeries cannot be "exposed" as were the Scottish manuscripts of Ossian, fabricated by James MacPherson to authenticate his "translations" of the epics *Fingal* and *Temora*. Nor can they become the sublime, high serious objects of a deconstructive critical irony like the voices of *The Waste Land* or *Personae*, since their inescap-

able self-awareness as forgeries encases them in an already parodic irony. They are, in fact, probably the only North American texts which honestly merit the label Borgesian, despite several decades of Borges wannabees in English. I cannot think of a more Borgesian sentence anywhere in North American writing than this from the opening of Tablet XXVII when the scholar/translator describes his first encounter with the nine cylinder-seals which constitute the "original" of that Tablet: "I will never forget the vibrations, the shimmerings, that overmastered me when, my arm outstretched; I first experienced the pressure of one of these Seals of the palm of my hand." The poetics of that ego-absolving process are for Schwerner quite particular: "The Poem in its wholeness is a Ground occupied by and occupying its notes. No more than you or I can the Poem leap out of its own condition to arrive into some supervening observatory under the aspect of eternity." And in looking back to the composition process by which he came to the construction of Tablets XXVI and XXVII, he sees the finished texts as "a world of purpose constrained," lacking the "urgencies and panics of the rooting-about processes," the muddles of mismanagement and confusion which the self was lost in; ". . . that constraining world makes me feel cold and partial, alien to myself. And I take that 'myself' to subsume awareness of the poetic and social geists, myself as poet/semiologist of more than just my 'little I' as Suzuki Roshi named for his students the limited reflexive self muddling in gravid losses. How could such an alienness be otherwise?" (Glosses 1-2) It is, finally, the lure of an unmediated—but deeply meditated—relationship between self-being, or mind-in-being, and language that propels these Tablets to their conditions of articulation. Here Schwerner, become nothing himself, comes to a state of belief in his fictional certainty, translating simultaneously nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

As Schwerner puts it reflexively in the unpublished "Glosses" on Tablets XXVI and XXVII, the graphic icon of Mac software increasingly gave him the liberated space in which to elaborate the primal and transformative language games which the *Tablets* have become:

Now it became possible to produce not merely the "translation" for which the Scholar/translator presented himself as responsible, but the ur-language itself.

Nominally linguist as well as translator, the Scholar/translator, is, on the deepest level of his intention, wild for the unmediated experience of language. He lusts for immediate Being, immanence, through sign: an osmotic coming-into-meaning through image endlessly. (Glosses 8)

In a brief section of my interview with Schwerner published in *APR* we focus on a specific, I believe essential, passage of the translated cylinders' forged cuneiform text in Tablet XXVII. In that passage I am reading Schwerner's epigraphical poetic as applied to that most ancient of artifacts, his own consciousness of consciousness. Specifically, the passage works to decipher the interactions of the visual, the aural and the oral (with some hint of the olfactory

also) in the activity of the human sensorium, seeking to fix the site of consciousness itself on its way to language:

W.G.: Perhaps we could examine the S/T's [scholar/translator's] synoptic translation of the nine cylinder-seals at the end of Tablet XXVII. It seems to me that this final poem in fact encapsulates and summarizes most of the issues that the S/T has been raising and struggling with all the way through his commentaries, the effort to comprehend the complex interrelationships between image and meaning, pictograph and cuneiform, Determinative and interpretation.

Schwerner: Maybe you could read that, because whoever is going to read this probably won't have the work in front of him.

W.G.: . . . *let's say arrive through the blind  
artificer's ferreting hands to the corrugated  
soil or the worm-rich lapsus-loam there are fingers  
treating of ridges treating there they palpate fractures premature  
calcifications the dawn light's cries of the rough edges  
of designing vocables and who sees?  
eye from an eye  
the seeking rainbow-cords link to the object, not-two, it's the sentence of  
the eater  
sitting in the court of surprise*

W.G.: . . . the seeing which breaks down the barrier between subject and object. There is no subject and object. The eye, ' . . . seeking rainbow-cords link to the object, not-two. . . ' But then comes the problem of oral expression. How does the oral succumb to the priority of the eye?

*. . . or that this tongue  
arrive for the sour and sweet macerated word-mash  
cave-shrimp blind taste crust of the common  
denotation. . . . .  
the eye! the cadence of the eye!  
the sought, seduced appropriating traveler in the two  
of one place, seducible through an apparent end of separation*

W.G.: . . . the character on the cylinder-seal is a cadence of the eye.  
Schwerner: 'Apparent end of separation.' That's his adjective, right?

W.G.: But of course it's the original speaker's adjective—

Schwerner: Supposedly.

W.G.: that the translator finds.

Schwerner: Except that you can never tell because all you've got is a bunch of pictures. It's again a game of Who do you trust?

W.G.: And then we have the question of the voices:

*. . . the voices!*

*look, see them*  
and we see the voices:

*look, see them in the azury center*  
*falling-*  
*. . . or that the nostrils be guiltless of seeking*  
*meditating*  
*nostrils no flare of nostrils scow-stink hyacinthine odors*  
*of utterance-shards*

so that even the nostrils are involved in this apprehension of expression, of voices which come to us through the eye:

*. . . or that through hammer stirrups anvil in a  
surface-rising  
edged and common sound-bond a transfer is being taken on*

But how is that "being taken on," except through the eye, so that the ear's activity has been performed through an act of imagination via the eye?

Schwerner: But there is an imponderable paradox which underlies all this, because, for instance, Father Ong, again, in *Orality and Literacy*, talks about the way in which the visual sense tends to separate, and the way the auditory sense makes possible a psychic collectivity. So you've got the antithetical sense raised constantly by the statements in the final poem in XXVII, and there are echoes of that antithetical position floating in and out of a number of the recent *Tablets*.

So you've got in this area too the human sensorium and its relationship to unitary experience because almost all of the sensorium is evoked in that poem. You've got sensorium as vectors, each having a voice as it were. And you're constantly doing and undoing, doing and undoing and the idea then that one, in a sense, gets from this is that there is no place to stand, *from* which one can observe anything else." (APR 31-32)

So the text of the found/forged ancient cylinder-seal turns out to be the enactment of its own fabrication, loss, and recovery in the sensorium of the world and of the archaeologist/epigrapher/poet, and the inescapable, if nearly ungraspable, revelation of this text concerns the nature of flux in the psychic collectivity we each, severally and alone, inhabit. Poetry as an "act of the mind" which is found in the act of finding itself, and in so doing finds itself sufficient for certainty and belief and sacred trust, an act of language re-recovery, a re-masking and re-exposure of the sacred, at once dazzling and mournful. We observers and fellow epigraphers have the privilege of inhabiting those fictive certainties of being-in-language which Schwerner's forged icons once again render sacred and accessible, "not . . . as obeisance to the sacred, but as a creation of it in all

MICHAEL HELLER

Musings on the Ground of Translation:  
Reading the New Tablets Journals/Divigations

We have as our documents, Schwerner's many 'translations from numerous works,' The *Philoctetes*, the Dante work, etc., and, of course, The Tablets. I have suggested in the recent Schwerner *Talisman* that, to borrow Schwerner's own words, these works appear to involve "an intention to carry over" a prior work or prior existent into a present articulation. Clearly the vocabulary employed by Schwerner of 'translation,' 'version' and 'working' suggests some sort of source, a well or excavation from which something is to be drawn or worked or re-envisioned, something to be concretized, made transmittable through the text which Schwerner then produces. Looking at the new additional end notes to the forthcoming complete *Tablets* from NPF, what Schwerner calls "Tablets Journals/Divigations" (TJ/D), I sense that a notion of a prior work or text is more difficult to put one's finger on. These notes, part autobiography, part confession, part ars poetica, are quite fascinating and will be of great interest to readers and scholars of Schwerner's work. I want to narrow my thoughts about them here to a few speculative remarks on Schwerner's work. The time constraints we are under and the absorbing complexity of the material in the notes make this an extremely partial and limited discussion.

Schwerner, in the *Journals*, formulates the problem of his work in this way: "What is the nature of the recurrent hope for the seizure of the irreducible?" Such a hope may be vain; as he puts it, "the sense that whatever could be findable will not be findable . . ."

Here is the first entry: All concepts are misconceptions.

Not only must we acknowledge that Schwerner has made this his 'headline,' so to speak, but that its cautionary import is addressed not only to the reader but to the author himself. In this sense, the entry points two ways at once. First, if, in the matrices of the act of translation, a source text exists (*Philoctetes*, Dante, Michaux, Amerindian chants, whatever), any reading, by the reductive process of reworking, is already a misreading. The letter is, alas, the letter, but the mind is yet something else. Neither literalism nor poeticizing (by these I mean a spectrum of possible approaches to translating) will render what cannot be found (the mis- of misconception) by forming a fixed idea of what the text says. The *Scholar/Translator's* work, in fact, is a textbook of misapprehensions and misreadings, which, on the level of parody, puts us through a number of lesson plans, deliciously serio-comic, on what fails when Western Civ. meets the big Other.

One doesn't perceive the words; rather, Schwerner maintains, "the words perceive you, in their variousness." Schwerner defines the *Tablets* as "a grammar facilitating the arrival into a word through some conduit, to abolish Option by inhabiting utterance." It is "the self-undoing genre crowded with doing."

In the *Journals/Divigations*, Schwerner describes these as the *Scholar/Translator's* "morphemalgia," a wonderful word which can be un-